

THE STORY OF OUR LIVES FROM YEAR TO YEAR

ALL THE YEAR ROUND

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GRETCHEN.

By the Author of "Dame Durden," "My Lord Conceit,"
"Darby and Joan," "Corinna," etc.

BOOK I.

CHAPTER II.

"BUT I WOULD—LIVE!"

LISSCHEN woke with a start, and sat bolt upright, and looked round with the defiant, terribly wide-awake stare of a person who would say: "Tell me I have been napping, if you dare!"

Her charge was sitting at a little distance off—her slender fingers busy weaving a garland of daisies and wild grasses—the sunbeams playing at hide-and-seek over her golden hair, and the pretty curves and lines of her girlish figure.

Lisschen's sharp eyes saw nothing amiss. She rose to her feet and looked at the slanting sun-rays.

"We must be getting home, child," she said in her gruff voice. "It grows late."

"I am ready," said Gretchen, rising, and slinging her pretty garland on her arm.

The old woman looked sharply at her. There was so glad a ring in her voice, so bright a light in her face—a change, faint and indescribable, but yet a change. It was not possible that she could know that the wheel of Life's fate had been set in motion during her own brief period of slumber; and yet a suspicion leapt into life, and fastened itself upon her heart with something near akin to fear.

"You have had a long sleep, Lisschen," went on the girl merrily. "No doubt you were tired, and the afternoon was hot. Even the birds were quiet."

"I have not slept," cried the old woman sharply. "I did but close my eyes from the sun, while you were gather-

ing your flowers." Then those same eyes turned again to the radiant young face. "Why do you smile so?" she asked suspiciously. "What have you seen or done that pleases you so?"

"Nay, Lisschen," said the girl, dimpling with happy laughter. "If you have been awake this hour past, you know all I have seen and done."

The woman gave a short grunt, and twisted her neglected knitting into a hard ball.

"Come," she said, "we waste time talking, and the gnädige Frau will be home from Vienna if we hurry not."

She trotted off without ceremony, her sharp eyes glancing from side to side as if in search of some suspicious object. The girl walked beside her in a vain endeavour to curb the exuberance of her spirits. Her feet seemed to dance along the path; her lips were perpetually breaking into smiles; snatches of joyous little songs left her ever and anon. Even cross old Lisschen could scarce resist the fascination of her blithe and jocund mood.

"I don't know what pleases you," she said at last. "One would think the Wood-Fairy had been with you."

"Perhaps she has," laughed the girl merrily. "I was speaking to her when you had your eyes closed. Lisschen, I marvel you did not hear us talk."

"There was—someone, then," said the old woman sharply; "who was it?"

"Don't look so cross, and I will tell you," said Gretchen coaxingly, slipping her arm into that of the grim old servitor. "Ah, Lisschen, you were a young girl once, and pretty, I am sure; and doubtless Fritz thought so, before he went to that cruel war and was killed. Now, leave off frowning and listen. I must tell someone, and I would rather tell you, even if you're cross."

"Well, well," said the old woman more amiably, "have thy way. Thou art a tiresome child, but I will listen; only do not fancy I was asleep in the woods. I knew thou wert speaking to someone."

"Indeed, you were asleep, sound asleep, good Lisschen. But no matter. I did but speak to a poor, blind gentleman, whose servant had left him. And I suppose you heard all we said, did you not, Lisschen?"

"A blind man?" muttered the old woman, "no great harm there."

Indeed, she was rather uneasy at her own negligence of her charge, having always had strict injunctions never to allow Gretchen to exchange words with any stranger, whether man or woman.

"Harm? Of course there was no harm!" cried the girl indignantly. "I wonder when I am to be treated like other people, or allowed to exchange words with a human creature outside the house. Oh, Lisschen, why is it that no one loves me there?—and yet they won't give me the chance of loving anyone else."

"Hush!" cried the old woman, alarmed at the passionate outburst; "talk not so foolishly, child. You—what do you want with love? You are not for the world—you know that—nor for the company of friend and folk outside your own; you have heard that often enough. Take it to heart then, and try to be content."

"But I can't be content," said the girl rebelliously. "I am young, and life looks so beautiful, and I want to enjoy it. Why should I not?"

"Because," said the old woman, her voice strangely troubled, "there are sins that fall on innocent heads, and wrongs that Heaven visits on other lives beside those to whom reparation belongs. Nay, ask no more. Thy life is a life born under black shadows—a shame and a sorrow to those with whom thy lot is cast. To offer it to Heaven is the best use to which it may be put. Think not of friends, or pleasure, or love; such things can only be a curse to thee—nothing more."

She had spoken so fiercely, with such suppressed passion, and yet such an unwilling sorrow for the sorrow her words wrought, that Gretchen looked at her in momentary wonder, seeming to trace some hidden vein of tenderness or emotion beneath this usually frozen surface.

Tears rose slowly to her eyes. Could any fate more cruel, any life more repugnant, be offered to one in whom the very

light, and joy, and beauty of spring itself, seemed centred?

"It is very cruel," she said at last, the tears banished by a sudden flame of anger. "I, surely, might have some voice in the matter. Oh!" she added, her whole soul shaken with passionate yearning, "if my mother had but lived she would not have treated me so unjustly; she would not at least have denied me such rights as belong to the commonest creatures on earth—air, freedom, sunshine, love. I had better have died when she did, than have lived for such a fate."

"To live as you wish might be a harder fate," said Lisschen; "there is always sorrow in the world—and the love of which you talk is only a pitfall and a snare."

"No matter!" said the girl defiantly, throwing back her bright head and looking up with glowing eyes to where the sunlight touched the heights. "No matter! I would risk them—dare them—defy them—but I would—live!"

The old woman looked at her in amazement. She had never heard such words from the childish lips, or seen such defiance in the childish face. It thrilled her with pity; for none knew better than herself that the feminine creature does not exist who can dare or defy the ills of such fate as comes to one who is beautiful, and nameless, and unloved.

They had left the wood now, and stood on a little hill from which could be seen the village of Neu-Waldegg, with its white houses and winding road, and the afternoon sunlight resting warm and bright on many a quaint old gabled roof. The call of a cuckoo sounded from a neighbouring bough, as it stood swaying among the budding blooms. Everywhere beauty and brilliance glowed warm and bright; and the girl who stood there with her wistful face turned homewards, might have well impersonated the very Goddess of Spring itself.

The woman looked at her with the softness of a sudden regret in her dim eyes, then hurried on, leaving the girl to follow as she would.

At the little restaurant below, a group of people were seated at the tables, some drinking milk, others smoking, and chattering, and laughing under the shady trees. A flock of pigeons, white and coloured, fluttered about the ground, or picked up the crumbs of black bread tossed to them by the women.

Seated at one of the tables, Lisschen noticed a young man. He had a fair skin, and bright, soft hair; he held a rough stick in his hand; round the upper part of his face, and concealing his eyes, was bound a black silk handkerchief; a soft felt hat shaded his features.

For a moment the woman paused and looked at him. A man with a dark, olive-skinned face and deferential bearing, advanced from the trees bearing a glass of milk on a small tray, which he placed beside the young fellow.

Lisschen saw the quick turn of the head, and heard the lazy, musical voice murmur some words. She stood quite still as if turned to stone.

When the sound of light footsteps made her turn, she seized the arm of her young charge, while one brown, shaking hand pointed at the figures under the trees.

"Is that the blind man?" she asked hoarsely.

"Yes," said Gretchen, colouring with sudden, shy delight.

"And he is an Englishman, and young. What a misfortune!" ejaculated Lisschen in horror. "Child," and she grasped the girl's slender arm so fiercely that it hurt her, "as you value the little liberty you have, speak not of this at home. Ah, surely the Evil One himself must have put it into my head to sleep this afternoon, of all others."

And before the astonished girl could speak a word, Lisschen hurried her past the little tables and the scattered groups, nor ever slackened speed till they reached the steep, roughly-paved street, which runs from Neu-Waldegg to Dornbach.

"Why do you all hate the English so?" asked Gretchen, panting and breathless, as the old woman at last moderated her pace.

"No matter," said Lisschen, "you will know some day."

"Some day," echoed the girl restlessly, "what use is that? I want to know now."

For to the young "some day" is as though one said "never." But Lisschen did not remember that, so long it was since Youth had been with her.

CHAPTER III.

PYRAMUS AND THISBE.

THE houses in Dornbach are wonderfully alike. One long, winding road—rough, and stony, and ill-paved—runs through the village, and straight on to the tramway lines that connect the little suburb

with the bright, beautiful Austrian capital beyond. The houses on the right of the Hauptstrasse stand under the shelter of sloping hills, thickly wooded and very beautiful. In one of these houses lived the Herr von Waldstein and his unmarried daughter, sister to the unfortunate mother of Gretchen.

They were stern, proud, exclusive people. They mixed with no society; entertained no visitors; and went nowhere, except to the church, or occasionally to Vienna.

The every-day life of a German household is, at best, a dreary affair; but, situated as Gretchen was, her existence was doubly melancholy. It would have been unendurable but for the girl's brightness of disposition and sweet content—traits which might have won love from any hearts; but which, strange to say, only served to put her further and further away from the affections of her natural protectors.

Her education had been at the Convent; her only companions the grim and austere sisterhood. The severest creeds; the sternest self-discipline; the most bigoted faith, had alone been set before her. And yet, with all this, so intense was that exuberance of joyous youth; so rich was that mine of imagination, poetry, and feeling, within her fresh young soul, that again and again she escaped from the hard tenets and unlovely teaching of her captors, and soared free and joyous above the level of their tyranny.

It was the morning after her meeting with the Englishman in the woods of Neu-Waldegg. The sun was flooding her little bare room with its warm, abundant rays; outside in the garden the birds were all awake, and chattering and gossiping in free and friendly fashion.

The girl sprang up; her eyes bright as stars, her long hair flooding the pillow with its billows of gold. She was wide awake, and took a brief survey of the light and radiance which was tempting her from sleep.

"I will go and do some gardening," she thought, and forthwith sprang from the bed, and with rapid fingers made her morning toilet.

Certainly the girl had little or no vanity. Had it been otherwise, she might well have been pardoned for dwelling with delight on the picture she made.

Her cheeks glowed like rose petals; her lips were dimpled round with smiles at some thought that pleased her; her lovely

hair curled and rippled from her brow, and fell in thick masses nearly to her feet. The curves of her slight, young form would have enchanted a painter, as would the soft, white throat, and rounded arms, and little, lovely hands. But, enchanting as was the picture she made, Gretchen certainly gave it scant attention. The heavy hair was brushed rapidly, and with rather an impatience of its enviable length and thickness, tucked back behind the shell-like ears, and plaited into its usual tail; a few rebellious rings and curls were smoothed rigorously away from the white temple, only to struggle back again and soften the outlines of the sweet, young face. Her grey linen dress was thrown on and buttoned with hasty fingers; then she snatched up a little white handkerchief and tied it over her head, knelt for a few moments before the tiny bracket that held an image of the Virgin and a wooden cross, and then went with swift, light steps down the polished stairs, and let herself out by a back door into the garden.

The garden was a large one; it ran far back from the house, and almost to the base of the wooded hills that surround Dornbach. She ran down the gravel path and past the blossoming fruit trees, and on to the very end of the precincts, where she had her own particular plot of ground, cultivated with that ardour that was characteristic of herself and everything she undertook.

Hoeing, and weeding, and digging, and raking; peering now and then into some green calyx; watching the industrious course of some noisily buzzing bee; listening to the glad song of some bird high up among the lofty boughs; so she loved to spend the bright morning hours, so she proposed to spend them now.

Unconsciously to herself her own voice broke into song when her feathered favourite ceased. A sweet, gay little snatch of melody expressive enough of light heart and joyous spirits.

It was a surprise to her when, at the end of that little outburst, a voice near at hand, and yet proceeding from no visible source, said softly, "Fräulein Gretchen!"

In vain the girl's startled eyes searched above and around; no one was visible. Again, however, the same voice breathed the same words.

"Who is it?" demanded the girl sharply, standing quite motionless now with the rake in her hand, and her eyes eager and questioning.

"Don't be frightened. Have you forgotten yesterday? You see my memory is better. I knew your voice at once."

"The Herr Gländer!" fell breathlessly from the girl's lips. "But where are you then?"

"In the next garden. I find I am living next door to you. I told you my man had taken rooms for me in Dornbach. There is a gate here; it leads into the woods. Have you one also?"

"Yes; but it is locked."

"Confound it," muttered the young man in English. "If you could get out we might go into the woods and have a talk," he added in her own language. "But, tell me first, were they angry with you for speaking to me yesterday?"

"They do not know," said the girl, her colour coming and going swiftly with the excitement of this unexpected meeting. "I told L sschen, and she bade me keep it to myself."

"Wise Lisschen! And you will?"

"I told you before, they hate your nation—it would only anger them."

"It is very foolish of them," said the young Englishman. "Why should they hate us?"

"I cannot tell."

"I hope," he said, "you won't follow their bad example. I should be sorry."

"I do not hate—anybody," she answered, lifting up so radiant a face that it was a pity he could not see it.

"That is right—but I wish you would come into the woods and talk to me. It is rather tiresome to have to converse in this Pyramus and Thisbe fashion. Do not you think so?"

"Who were they?" asked the girl, evading a direct answer.

"Do you mean to say you never heard of Pyramus and Thisbe? Let me come to you and I will tell you the story."

"I love stories!" cried the girl eagerly. "But—I can't come into the woods to hear it—indeed I can't!"

"Then may I come to your gate and talk to you?"

For a moment Gretchen hesitated; some sense of that unwritten law which breathes its wisdom into even the most perfect innocence, bade her be cautious now.

"How is it you can tell the way?" she asked evasively.

"I can just remove my bandage for a moment; my sight is getting better every day. May I come?"

"I have no right to prevent your using

the wood," she said, colouring shyly. "But I think it is not quite—right—is it? They would be angry if they knew I spoke to you—or, indeed, to any stranger."

"Then they are very unjust and uncharitable," said the young man impetuously. "And I am—coming, Fräulein Gretchen!"

He suited the action to the word, unlatched the gate, crossed the intervening space, and was at her own gate in a moment.

The girl threw down her rake, and went to meet him. They were completely shut out from sight of the house, even had those watchful and jealous guardians of the girl been stirring. But it was far too early for that, being, indeed, scarcely five o'clock. He put out his hand, and Gretchen gave him hers. There was no disfiguring bandage about his eyes; they looked at her as never eyes had looked before.

He was thinking how far lovelier she was than even he had thought her the previous day, thinking, too, that never again would he see a spring morning, or feel the rich sweet scents of fresh-turned earth and dewy flowers, without seeing, too, this one face, with its beautiful youth and gravely innocent eyes, look back at him from the picture.

For a moment only had the girl let her hand rest in his. She was quite silent; her eyes studying his face with the intent and serious gaze of a child who sees something new and strange.

It was a very handsome face, if somewhat effeminate by reason of that fair skin and soft bright hair, and a certain weakness or shortness of vision that gave the eyelids a tendency to droop.

"Well?" he said at last, and smiled.

She started and drew her hand away. "Was I rude?—forgive me, please. I was thinking how glad—oh, how very, very, glad you must be to see all—this—again!"

Her hand gave a little comprehensive gesture which he followed.

"Glad! ah, that I am!" he said, "after all that long darkness to look up at sky, and trees, and sunshine. It is like life—health—freedom, when all seemed about to be lost. Glad! well—it is a poor word to express what I felt and feel. Every voice is like a friend's, and every face is beautiful."

Those eyes rested on her as he spoke with an eloquence that seemed to flash light and warmth into her soul, and fill it with new and varied feelings.

But the glance was not for long. He drew from his pocket a pair of glasses and put them on.

"The light is too brilliant as yet," he said. "You must forgive my looking hideous, mein Fräulein; my new possession is too precious to be risked for even such an excuse as your face."

The language of compliment was new to her. She did not even heed his words.

"The glasses make you look very funny," she said, "but you are right to be careful. Shall you have to wear them always?"

"Oh no, only for a short time! But come, don't trouble about me any longer. Do you still wish to hear your story?"

"Ah, yes!" she said eagerly. "Please begin, I have heard so few—except about the saints—and I am not allowed to read any books, except history, and philosophy, and religious treatises."

She stood resting her arms on the gate, the swaying boughs above throwing a thousand lights and shadows on her bright face and cool, grey dress.

"Well," said the young man gently, "Pyramus and Thisbe were two unfortunate lovers, separated by cruel destiny. Do you know what lovers are, mein Fräulein?"

"No," she said seriously, "unless you mean what Fritz was to Lisschen—some one she was fond of and going to marry."

He laughed.

"I didn't give Lisschen credit for so near an approach to anything feminine as the weakness of contemplating marriage," he said. "But you are not far wrong; only these lovers could not contemplate matrimony, except through the crannies of a thick wall that separated them from each other. A hard fate ruled their destinies. They used to come one on one side of the wall and one on the other, and hold serious converse through a chink. Love, you know, has laughed at barriers ever since Eros first fluttered his silver wings on the heights of Olympus. But then, I suppose, your priests don't allow you any knowledge of the heathen deities."

"No," she said simply. "Were they very wicked?"

"Some of them were most decidedly wicked," he answered with becoming gravity. "It was on these Olympian heights, you know, that Cupid had his birth, and he is certainly the most mischievous and dangerous of any of the gods. There are a thousand pretty legends and stories of them; I could lend you any

amount, but I suppose you wouldn't be allowed to read them."

He went on with the story, glancing ever and anon at the girl's absorbed face, with a sense of wonder that what was so old and stale to him could so enthrall and entertain another.

Then at her request for more stories, he told her of Hercules and Omphale; of Apollo and Daphne; of Persephone, and Psyche, and Ariadne; and the girl listened with beating heart and scarlet cheeks, and all her soul seemed to catch the fire of this strange enchantment that alike had come to god and mortal, bringing sorrow and suffering in its train, yet with one hour of its immortal glory repaying the purchase-right of the hearts it cursed.

It was dangerous teaching for one ardent, imaginative, enthusiastic as herself. Far more dangerous than her teacher knew, as her innocent, eager questioning led him on and on, over what was a very old and beaten track to him. It certainly was to his credit that he clothed the stories he related in the most delicate language and the most fanciful imagery, so that the girl's pure mind caught no shadow of another meaning than her own pure and lofty fancies bestowed.

A full hour passed, and both were engrossed still in their occupation; indeed, there is no knowing how much longer it might have lasted, but for the click of the neighbouring gate and the sound of approaching footsteps. Gretchen started like one in a dream. Her companion turned his head impatiently.

"Is it you, Bari?" he said.

"Yes, Monsieur," the man answered respectfully, and touching his hat as his dark eyes rested curiously on the beautiful girl to whom his master had been speaking.

"I fear I must bid you farewell for the present," said the young Englishman reluctantly, as his eyes turned to the girl's eager face. In a lower voice he whispered hurriedly: "Be here to-morrow at the same time, I implore you."

Then he placed his hand in the man's arm, and went back into the shade of the woods.

"Bari," he said, as soon as they were out of earshot, "you have done a good many things for me since you have been in my service, and I don't think you have found me ungenerous. Now listen. I want you to find out everything you can about these neighbours of ours. Do you hear? It ought not to be difficult—for you."

"Yes, Monsieur," the man answered calmly. "I will do my best."

"There is some mystery about—about that young lady," continued his master, restlessly. "I am interested in her, you understand?"

A faint smile quivered over the closed, thin lips.

"I understand, Monsieur, perfectly. It is a—private—matter, I suppose? I mean your uncle—"

"Good Heavens! Not a word to my uncle!" cried the young fellow energetically. "There is no need for him to know."

"No, Monsieur, of course not."

Again that strange smile flickered over the thin lips, and lighted the somewhat sinister eyes. Perhaps it was a pity that Neale Kenyon's own eyes were less observant of this face than of Gretchen's. Had they not been so, he would have considered twice before putting a trust into keeping so untrustworthy, or bestowing so dangerous a confidence in one of whom he knew so little as he knew of this man. Bari had been selected and engaged for him by his uncle. He was an intelligent man—made as good a courier as a valet, and was to all intents and purposes both honest and trustworthy. An Italian by birth, he professed himself a mere cosmopolitan; spoke many languages, and all equally well; and had proved himself invaluable to Neale Kenyon during his terrible affliction.

It had not occurred to the young man that Bari might become obnoxious, or obtrusive; that, if he so chose, he could play the spy only too well, and make the uncle pay for information which the nephew had already bought as confidence.

Neale Kenyon was far too careless to allow of any foothold for suspicion. There was nothing heroic about him; nothing that in any way set him apart from, or above his fellow man. He had been always a spoilt child of Fortune, and his blindness had brought him even more than its share of compassion, help, and tenderness. He was generous, but then generosity cost him nothing. He had inherited a small fortune from his mother, and was heir to the baronetcy held now by his uncle, Sir Roy Kenyon. This uncle had been his sole guardian, and was devotedly fond of the lad, denying him nothing, and fostering the weak points of a somewhat weak character by a systematic indulgence.

Sir Roy and his daughter Alexis were

Neale's nearest relatives, and their house had been his ever since his boyhood. They had spent the greater part of the winter with him in Vienna, but had returned to England when the operation had been pronounced successful, leaving Neale to travel where and how he pleased under the care of Léon Bari.

One caution alone had been administered to the Italian by the Baronet.

"If you see any signs of my nephew committing any follies in the shape of falling in love, at once communicate with me. A little casual flirtation is all very well, but the young gentleman is to marry his cousin. That fact must be kept before him. Remember, Bari, I trust you."

The wily Italian assured the Baronet of his ability to guard his young master's interests, and having received a handsome "tip" for the promise, resolved in his own mind that it depended on that master himself to keep any of his peccadilloes from the ears or knowledge of his guardian. It was satisfactory to be able to draw a salary from both, besides affording an opportunity for the exercise of those diplomatic talents on which he prided himself.

As yet no such opportunity had offered itself. To-day, however, Bari saw the first opening on that road to fortune, which he had assured himself lay in the mastery of the weak and generous-minded youth whom in his heart he rather despised.

To-day he saw Neale Kenyon roused and interested in something beyond the immediate pale of his own interests. To-day he would brace his energies and set his wits to work. If Bari had a weak point, it was pride in his own intellect, in his quickness, penetration, and secrecy.

"I would have made a great diplomat," he would say to himself. "There is no saying what I might not rise to, even now, if only I had not learnt that, for me, obscurity is safety."

And with that caution his brow would cloud, and the pulse of an ominous fear beat in his breast.

Whatever he had to do with the secrets of others, Léon Bari could keep his own securely enough. And to this man Neale Kenyon had entrusted the discovery of that mystery respecting Gretchen von Waldstein!

ON THE ICE.

ALTHOUGH people who are agreed about nothing else will generally unite to abuse our British climate, yet there is one thing

to be said for it, on the whole it gives good skating. If you have elsewhere more continuous and reliable frost, as in Canada, that frost is also accompanied by a weight of snow which bars the great stretches of ice to skaters, and drives the latter to their sheltered rinks. And rink skating may be an art or a pastime; but it cannot be called a sport, as open-air skating may fairly claim to be, any more than chasing a tame deer round the area of the Hippodrome, with whatever flourish of horns or baying of dogs, can be called hunting. Now, though our climate is variable, it varies chiefly in the direction of rigour, and few winters pass without giving some chance to the skaters. A writer of experience from the Fens assures us that, during a quarter of a century or so, only one winter was an absolute blank to him, as far as skating was concerned, and that, even during this exasperatingly mild season, he might have secured one day's skating had he been sufficiently on the alert.

There is a wonderful charm about the Fens in a fine hard winter, with the white plain of snow, and the dark lines marked out along the numerous cuts and channels, where the skaters are whirling along, making a tremulous murmur in the air. The sluggish rivers are fairly at rest; barges and hoys rest by the banks, all frozen into stiff immobility, and black and fragrant with fresh tar. The ferries are changed to icy bridges, where strenuous labourers strew a footing of straw, and levy irregular tolls on the passers-by. From the old-fashioned, high-crowned brick bridges a view may be had of the whole scene; while the village close at hand—with its handsome old church, whose dark pinnacles are outlined in snow—affords a comfortable hostelry, where the ale is good, and where the talk is all of skating and its champions past and present.

It must be noted, however, that these Fen skaters are a trifle intolerant. There is but one style of skating worthy of the name, and that is the Fen style. Figure-skaters these men look down upon; their graceful, fantastic evolutions are so much foolishness. When the Laureate writes down one of his heroes as

Tired out

With cutting eights that day upon the pond,

the verdict in the Fens is that it served him right, and that a Lincolnshire man should have known better than to be

cutting foolish cyphers on a miserable pond, when the whole scope and range of the Fens were open to him. But to the bulk of skaters who have only ponds to disport upon, of what use is it to descant upon the delights of running head-foremost at top speed for miles and miles? Now a pond of some kind is within reach of everybody, and hence the feats that may be done upon a pond are justly most esteemed by the general body of skaters.

And a pond, after all, is not to be despised—the Round Pond, we will say, with ruddy old Kensington Palace glowing through the haze, where here and there a window flashes back a ray of winter sunshine. As the wintry scene unfolds itself, an amphitheatre of snow and ice, hedged in with the tracery of bare leafless trees, a cheerful murmur fills the air, the whirl of skaters on the ice, the shouts of children, the lusty cries of the chair and broom brigade, which increase in volume as the margin of the pool is reached.

"Here y'are, lady, put your skates on, lady! Try a pair, sir, for a nour." More skilful tacticians vary the cry. "Here y'are, me lady," may prove to be more flattering to the social dignity of the fair one with the golden locks, who is hesitating as to the choice of a skate-fitter. Whence come these children of the frost and snow, grizzled, shabby, and hungry-looking, with their chairs, their carpet, their stock of skates for hire, who ply their trade with as much tact and nonchalance as if they had been working at the business all their lives?

From every side out of the surrounding haze appear groups of people hurrying to the scene, and already the pond is well crowded, while at the edges where the ice has been broken away, the water wells up intermittently as people sway to and fro. All the world is upon skates, or is having its skates put on—children in shoals, young men and young women, even elderly ladies. Here is a pretty governess, with a tribe of jolly little people to whom she is teaching the art of skating, as one of the accomplishments of her repertoire; there a group of youths, lanky and hungry-looking, who are wisely taking out the enforced leisure of hard times in vigorous exercise. Striking out with deliberate care, comes a stout, middle-aged man, with a yellow face and wide sandy beard, contrasting with the fresh, closely-clipped faces of the surrounding youth. Twenty years under Indian skies have made changes in

the stout gentleman's centre of gravity. Often, simmering in his bungalow, he has cooled himself by thinking of the frosty pleasures of his home life, and has promised himself skating galore for his first English winter. But now he finds even the outside edge forwards a little too much for his nerve; small boys beg him not to tumble till they are safely out of the way; the tone of the crowd is rather free to one who has been accustomed to move about amid profuse salaams; our Indian subsides into a chair with a sigh of relief and regret.

Now comes a young woman in severe and simple, almost masculine attire, attended by young fellows neat and compact, skimming easily along, but as if it were something of a penance, with an air of gloom that seems to say, "No hunting till the frost breaks." Again in more coquettish costume, a couple of damsels whose graceful undulations suggest the corps de ballet; while a serene young woman of fashion circles calmly here and there, as if she had the pond to herself, and she is followed by a bevy of rosy, laughing school-girls who tumble, pick each other up, and clatter along with gaiety unsubdued by falls and bruises.

But the general crowd are intent upon getting along as best they may. Certain young ladies remarked to Mr. Winkle, the motion is so graceful, so swan-like. But the first steps of the neophyte are not exactly graceful. The treacherous irons seem to baffle every attempt to move in the right direction. Now they dart forward, and land their owner on his back; again they slip backwards, and the beginner saves himself or herself, as the case may be, at somebody else's expense; both waltz round for a moment, and then are mixed up in a general fall. A plucky lad scrambles along determined to do or die, now up, now down, but gaining experience with every fall; his little sister with long flowing mane and crimson stockings totters cautiously along. More teachable is she, and practises her steps and turns her toes out to command, and will learn her lesson with half the tumbles and bruises that fall to her reckless brother.

Half a century and more ago, when Queen Victoria was a pretty smiling child, and lived in a corner of the big red Palace yonder, no doubt she would be driven in her little pony chaise well wrapped up in furs to see the skaters. There was a vast difference then in the scene upon the ice.

We may realise this if we glance at a steel engraving, the frontispiece to the "Skaters' Handbook" of 1832. The scene is a long piece of water surrounded by trees. Four gentlemen in frocks or swallow tails, with frilled shirt fronts and polished Hessian boots, disport upon the ice, each with his left hand in the air, performing some graceful figure. Along the margin of the pool a crowd of spectators watch their evolutions with steadfast admiration. Women in enormous coal-scuttle bonnets, wrapped in ermine tippets, with immense fur muffs; boys with hoops, girls in frills and furs form an appreciative gallery for the performers, or, in the words of the guide, for "mercurial figures which glide past in the fitful scene. The pleasurable feelings of the skater, alternately exchanging a word with his brethren in the throng, and then giving a furtive glance at the angelic face of beauty in her furs," may be better imagined than described. And all the time the crowd looks on admiringly, but without the slightest notion of sharing in the fun.

Long after this the winter scene on the Round Pond had something of the air of a fashionable gathering; the Skating Club performed all the latest flourishes upon the ice; and a goodly contingent from the Horse Guards Barracks—Captain Jack Belsize, Crackthorpe, and the rest, assisted at the solemnity, while a noble and distinguished gathering looked on. We have now changed all that. Nobody goes to the Parks in these days to witness fine skating, for the clubs and fine performers have retired to private waters; and instead of looking on, the world in general puts on skates and performs for its own amusement; and thus the scene is now more jolly, free, and democratic.

There is some danger, by the way, that, in the universal prevalence of skating, the old-fashioned art of sliding may sink into oblivion, such artistic sliding as that of Sam Weller, for instance—"knocking at the cobbler's door," that is "skimming over the ice on one foot and occasionally giving a postman's knock upon it with the other." Small boys, indeed, get up a slide among themselves; but those long and glistening tracks, jealously guarded from the incursions of skaters, along which it required a stout heart and a thick pair of nailed boots to launch oneself successfully, are now rarely to be met with.

Yet, till the Restoration, sliding was the winter diversion of the fashionable

young men of the day as well as of the crowd.

The gallants dancing at the river's side,
They bath in summer, and in winter slide.

We may look upon the "new canal" in St. James's Park, to which these lines refer, as the original seat of skating. The Fennemen, indeed, claim to have practised the art with consummate skill from time immemorial, and it seems probable that, as long as skating was practised in Holland, so it would be also known in the little Holland by the Nen and Ouse. But, as far as the general practice of skating was concerned, it is pretty certain that it was introduced by the courtiers of the Merry Monarch who had learnt the art in their exile. And for this, Samuel Pepys is in evidence, who writes in December, 1662: "Over the Parke, where I first in my life, it being a great frost, did see people sliding with their skatees, which is a very pretty art."

Evelyn, too, notes at the same date, "strange and wonderful dexterity of the sliders on the new canal in St. James's Park, performed before their majesties by divers gentlemen and others, with skatees, after the manner of the Hollanders."

The Duke of York, afterwards King James the Second, was, it seems, a skilful performer on the ice, and Pepys notes at the same period: "To the Duke, and followed him to the Park, where, although the ice was broken and dangerous, yet he would go slide upon his skatees, which I did not like; but he slides very well."

Now Pepys, it may be remembered, was from Huntingdon, and should have been well acquainted with the Fens, and, if skating had been practised there in his time, it seems strange that he should mention it as a novelty.

Half a century after this the use of skates could hardly have been universal, as Swift writes to Stella in 1711: "The canal and Rosamond's Pond full of the rabble, and with skatees, if you know what that is."

The rabble, as the aristocratic Dean called them, have always been at home in St. James's Park, and, when the Serpentine and the Round Pond were formed by Queen Caroline in 1730, the more aristocratic skaters migrated to the more exclusive waters, Kensington Gardens not being then open to the general public. Even now, the gathering upon the ice in St. James's Park is of a ruder and rougher character than elsewhere.

And now, with the facilities afforded by rail and telegraph, the best skaters and the most enthusiastic generally go further afield than the Parks. The chief skate shops are posted during a frost with telegrams from all parts as to the state of the ice. One may run down to Ely and take a turn with the fennmen; or, nearer at hand, there are Virginia Water, the Hendon Lake, Frensham Ponds, and dozens of others.

Still, it is pleasant for a mere casual skater to find himself or herself, without going far from home, among the pushing, cheerful crowd on the Serpentine or the Round Pond. How quickly the exhilarating feeling takes hold of people! We only came for an hour, and we stop two; we will snatch a hasty meal and be on the ice again. The moon is at its full; what about a torchlight procession and hockey on the ice? Visions of all kinds of fun seem to present themselves to the imagination; and then comes a drop of rain, and then a drizzle, and then a thorough down-pour, and we struggle through the slush, and mud, and general "débâcle" to hail a passing omnibus.

KNIGHTS OF THE WHEEL.

"By discovering a new dish," says the epigrammatic author of "*Physiologie du Gout*," "a man confers more benefit upon the human race than by discovering a new star." In my opinion, the man who invents a new pleasure, which can be shared by rich and poor alike, confers still greater benefit. And, as a recreation, there is, to my mind, nothing equal to tricycling, the only drawback being that it cannot be indulged in at all seasons of the year, and in all kinds of weather.

My own experiences of tricycling are of the most pleasant character, because I ride for the sake of health and recreation. I used to think Dr. Richardson a fanatic because he spoke so enthusiastically of its charms and benefits; but I now know that he underrated rather than overrated them. Indeed, it is impossible to convey an adequate idea of the intense pleasure derived from tricycling. Charles Lamb wished that he might have a pension, and walk out in the "fine Izaak Walton mornings, careless as a beggar, and walking, walking, and dying walking." His sensations of boundless delight when relieved from "this thorn of a desk," and

presented with his freedom, are only equalled by those experienced by the tricyclist.

My first experience of tricycling was, however, not very agreeable; for tricycles are like horses. Some run easily and give no trouble, while others take all the strength out of a man, and require great care in driving. I did not keep my resolve never to mount another tricycle. I selected a machine which proved easier than the first and more amenable to control; but it was some time before I discovered the existence of a tricycle which exactly suited me. This was a machine of the Gripper pattern, with a direct steerer. I found it easier to drive, and more comfortable. By means of a fork in the front wheel, vibration in this machine is reduced to a minimum.

Tricycling has given me, not only intense pleasure, but good digestion. Indigestion is a serious drawback to the comfort of literary men; in fact, it is to all men whose occupation is sedentary, whether clerks, or tailors, or watchmakers, or shoemakers, or authors.

I venture to think that if Carlyle, for instance, had used a tricycle, the morbid condition of his mind would have disappeared, and the enemy which soured his temper and embittered his life, would have vanished as by a spell. As William Howitt said: "There is nothing like a throwing off the harness and giving mind and body a holiday;" and the best way of doing this is by means of a tricycle. I tried all kinds of "remedies" for indigestion without success; but tricycling proved an unfailing cure; and I believe, with Dr. Gordon Stables, that, of all kinds of exercise, the best is cycling, when adopted with wisdom.

As a rule I have travelled alone, because I have never been able to keep on good terms with a companion. Like Charles Lamb's dog, he would persist in going where I did not want to go, and in refusing to look at things which took my fancy. When I called, he answered not; therefore we parted. Whether at home or abroad, I prefer wandering at my own sweet will, going down this road, and walking up that hill, plucking a wild flower here, and chatting with a labourer there.

But I do not underrate the advantages of travelling in company. In London it is absolutely necessary for the sake of protection from the gangs of roughs who infest every suburb; and, as accidents to tri-

cyclists usually arise from the stupidity of the drivers of horses, it is desirable to have a witness in view of legal proceedings. Prejudices against wheelmen still exist, proofs of which may be found every week in the pages of the cycling press. Hence the wisdom of a connection with the National Cyclists' Union, which endeavours to remove these prejudices. It is a vigilance association for the protection of its members. It defends them from assault and injury; it examines the bye-laws of Local Boards, and watches private Bills in Parliament affecting cyclists. It erects danger-boards on highways; it has just issued papers on the legal aspects of road repair, with special relation to the rights of cyclists to enforce the maintenance of roads. In a word, the National Cyclists' Union is the legislative body of wheelmen throughout the United Kingdom. The President of the Union is the Right Honourable Viscount Bury, who, like Lord Sherbrooke, rides a bicycle; and its members include the Honourable Keith Falconer, Professor of Arabic at Cambridge University; Mr. Oscar Browning, of King's College, Cambridge; and Mr. William Black, the novelist.

It is estimated that there are one hundred and seventy-five thousand cyclists in the United Kingdom; an estimate very much under the mark, in my opinion. Some idea of the demand for cycles may be gathered from the fact that one firm of makers alone employs over five hundred men. Coventry, it is well known, has derived a new lease of commercial life from the manufacture of tricycles and bicycles.

Much might be said of tricycling as an aid to touring. The road is certainly preferable to the rail; for in railway travelling one has no time to make observations, and to appreciate fully the beauty of the scenery through which the train rushes. One cannot tip the driver to pull up whilst an old church is examined, a ruined abbey visited, or a pretty bit of scenery sketched. Now, tricycling enables one to become acquainted with rural England, and the highways are literally alive with the "knights of the wheel" throughout the summer and autumn months. Here comes a party of "cads on castors;" there goes a happy couple spending their honeymoon on a tandem; yonder a party of grey-haired pilgrims to some distant shrine; and swiftly by them runs a gang of young fellows, who are straining every nerve on a record-hunting journey.

The public-houses, as well as the highways, are a scene of bustle and animation which has had no parallel since the old coaching days. For the publican the "good old times" have indeed returned; and he seems determined to make the most of them. He certainly deserves to be well paid by the racing men for whom he has to cater at all hours of the night; but it is unfair to treat all cyclists alike. It must not be forgotten, however, that tricycling creates an enormous appetite, which must throw consternation in the minds of some landladies.

One advantage of using the Cyclists' Touring Club hotels, where a reduced tariff is supposed to be in force, is, that in many cases the hotel-keeper is himself a tricyclist, and a fellow feeling makes him wondrous kind. Sometimes he is able to repair broken machines, and is always in a position to stable the machines of his customers. This is a decided advantage; for it is no easy matter to find good accommodation for man and machine.

But although cycling is an aid to touring, the tricycle serves a much more useful purpose as a means of recreation. Daily exercise of some sort is indispensable to all men, especially to brain-workers; and, in my case, tricycling is better than walking. I like the country in summer time, but, if I were to walk out of the city in which I live, it would take me above an hour to get clear of the Babel of bricks; whereas, on my tricycle, I can reach the green fields easily in a few minutes. In all respects, tricycling is a much better form of recreation than walking. It is a delightful as well as a beneficial exercise. The pleasure of motion on a tricycle must be felt; it cannot be put into words.

I should like to see an extension of tricycling, among women especially; because it is not only a most delightful but most beneficial exercise. The "demon of want of beneficial exercise and its results must be combated," said Dr. Cantlie in his lecture on "Degeneration amongst Londoners," and he referred with approval to three sports which "have taken a hold on the community." First among them came cycling, concerning which he remarks: "By the bicycle and tricycle men and women can be carried rapidly out of town to country lanes and open air. The exercise is pleasant, in that the motion is rapid, and that one is sent along by one's own exertion. Nothing in the way of exercise could be more calculated to do

good to dwellers in towns, and it seems a merciful interposition that such an excellent means has been supplied. It allows of really beneficial exercise when it carries its rider out of an ozoneless region."

Tricycling is, moreover, a safe pastime. Accidents seldom occur to persons who go at a steady pace and who keep their machine under control. A rider's safety depends largely upon the brake, which should be carefully examined before starting on a journey.

In brief, then, tricycling has furnished me with an enjoyable form of recreation; it has cured me of dyspepsia; it has enabled me to sleep better; it has given me a knowledge of mechanics; and it has made me better acquainted with the green lanes and the rustic charms of Old England. And, if you choose, it will do all these things for you.

MY POOR LITTLE STORY.

A STORY IN TWO CHAPTERS. CHAPTER II.

"WELCOME home, dear Lucy!"

"Yes, I have come back; I could not go on any longer without seeing you all."

Mother was kissing me effusively, and the young ones had clustered round to welcome me. They had all warm hearts, if they had nothing else, at Mudford.

Father and Marion had met me at the station and had walked home with me, while a porter took charge of my luggage.

"You left Aunt Hilda well?" mother asked anxiously, as she led me from the hall into the shabby parlour, which seemed ten times shabbier than ever.

"Yes, quite well; she sent you her love, and I have a present from her for you, and another for Marion, and Marion and I are to go back to her together; and I was to tell you that she will write a long letter soon and tell you everything."

"And you liked living with her?" Chrissie asked curiously.

Chrissie came next in years to Jack, who followed me, and was just at the age to wonder over her own chances of promotion to Aunt Hilda's favour.

"Yes, she was very kind. Aunt Hilda is kind, though she does not always seem so at the first."

"I always said you and she would suit each other, did I not?" Marion asked, smiling.

"Yes, and you were right, though she

never ceases to deplore that I am not a Hurst."

"What does that matter, when you are going to become a Leslie?" Chrissie asked flippantly; and at this not very obvious joke all the young ones laughed.

I blushed a little, and then Marion and I went upstairs together that I might perform a toilet and enjoy a chat.

Like everything else about home Marion seemed to have changed and deteriorated, though I had tact enough not to tell her so. I do not mean to say that she was not still most beautiful, but there was a vague, inexplicable shadow on her loveliness.

"Not happy," I said to myself; "and no wonder."

In my own joy and triumph I could afford to pity even her.

I could not have told why I was so sorry for them all—for father, who was thinner and greyer than ever; for mother, whose dark eyes had deeper shadows beneath them; for the boys and girls, who seemed all legs and elbows through their patched and shabby clothing.

"Do you know what I think the greatest grief in life?" I asked suddenly, looking up from a kneeling position on the floor, where I was busily tugging at the straps of my biggest trunk.

"No; what is it?"

"Poverty. Not the poverty that starves in a garret—that must end one way or another soon—but the poverty mis-named genteel, which has aspirations and knowledge, but no hope and no chance of attainment to anything beyond a meagre crust of daily bread."

"Yes, poverty is tyrannous and ugly," Marion answered dreamily; "but oh, how beautiful it makes people, Lucy, when they bear it patiently! To live with father and mother, and to watch them amid all their struggles, is an education."

"Yes; but I think there are pleasanter things than illustrating in one's own person the blessedness of suffering," I said grimly. "For their sakes I am tired of it, Marion, and one of the sweetest thoughts I have is that I shall be able to help them in the future."

"I don't think father will care to accept alms of Sir Gilbert Leslie," Marion said, languidly lifting her proud head.

"Alms! how can you put it so? Who ever thought of alms? But there are a hundred things a rich man can do for his—for those he wishes to serve."

"And there are things a poor man can-

not accept, even from a son-in-law. Sir Gilbert can get father a living if he tries; that is the only thing he would accept, or that I should let him accept."

"What in the world have you to do with it?" I asked pettishly, for the diamond circlet on my finger made me brave to confront even Marion.

"I am father's daughter, the one who is likely to be with him longest of all his children, and I have a right to say where-in we shall decline the favours even of Sir Gilbert and Lady Leslie. Certainly we are poor, but we are not paupers."

"How unkind you are!" I cried, bursting into tears. "If I had known that you would have had only reproaches to greet me with, I don't think I should have cared to come home."

"Forgive me, Lucy." She came over and knelt down beside me, and put her arm about me. "Believe me, I am very glad you are happy, very glad you will have love and all else that you value in the future."

"I should like you to be pleased—I should like you to like Gilbert."

"You are very fond of him?"

"How could I be anything else—so handsome, and clever, and splendid as he is?"

"And so rich too."

I looked up at her sharply. "Yes, he is rich, but I did not think of that; if I had only thought of money I might have done even better than Gilbert."

"Then you were quite a success?"

"I did not say so; but one may be liked without being the distinguished beauty you are."

Marion rose from her knees and smoothed her dress carefully with her hand. "I did not mean to offend you," she said slowly. "I don't think your visit to Aunt Hilda has improved you." And then she went downstairs, and left me to cry my eyes out over the presents I had packed with such pleasure for everyone. I had anticipated a certain amount of pain in my home-coming, but certainly I had not expected to be rebuked and disregarded.

I recalled carefully every word that had passed between Marion and me, and grew only more indignant under a sense of wrong. I had said nothing to offend her, and she certainly had been unkind.

"Perhaps she is angry that I am getting married before her?" I said, but dismissed the thought as contemptible. What could she care for that, when she had refused to marry Lord Stelfox?

Mother came up a little later to sit with me. Dear, sweet mother! she was ready enough to hear all I had to tell, and to rejoice with me.

"You are very fond of Sir Gilbert?" she said, stroking my hair tenderly.

"Oh, yes! How could I help it? When you have seen him you will wonder, as I do, how he could ever have thought of a little stupid thing like me."

"I don't know that men generally like women better for being very large or very clever," mother answered with her bright smile.

"He is as handsome as he can be," I went on; "and he is such a natural man. I never was shy with him as I am with most people; and we were friends from the very first; and I never was ashamed to let him know that we were poor at home, and I do not in the least mind his coming here and seeing all our makeshift ways. Perhaps that is because he was not always rich himself. In his youth he had struggles like other people, and came into the baronetcy quite unexpectedly last year."

"Yes; his cousin was drowned, I remember."

"Marion knew him a little long ago, but I suppose she has forgotten him, for he was of no account then; but he remembers her perfectly, and he told me some particulars of her engagement to Lord Stelfox; and we have arranged that when we are married we shall try to bring them together again."

"It is not often that men are match-makers," mother said, flushing prettily over the grand future which seemed opening out before her daughters.

"Oh! I think I am the matchmaker, but he approved of all I proposed; for, of course, he sees how desirable it is that all should come right between them."

"What is Lord Stelfox like?"

"He is nice; not as handsome as Gilbert, but nice nevertheless. Not very young, you know, but handsome. Aunt Hilda is very fond of him."

"I wonder what came between him and Marion?"

"I don't know; and neither does Aunt Hilda."

Mother and I went downstairs amicably, arm in arm, and though Marion did not make any reference to our conversation, her manner was apologetic. But she manifested no interest in Gilbert, nor even asked how anything had come about.

We were all very busy in the days before Gilbert came, cooking and scrubbing,

patching and darning, so as to wear our best aspect before him.

"Thank goodness my share in the general neediness is nearly over!" I said as I put little final touches to the flowers I was arranging in the spare bedroom, while Marion was tacking on fresh window-blinds.

"You have a great horror of poverty," she said, with that cold intonation that I was learning to know and detest.

"I hate it more than anything in the wide world."

"Then how fortunate that you will be so far beyond its reach in the future!"

"Yes, I am glad Gilbert is rich."

"Is he very rich?"

"Eighteen thousand a year."

"You ought to live very comfortably on that."

"Of course it is a small thing compared with Lord Stelfox's income," I said, rather nettled by her coolness.

"Indeed! Is Lord Stelfox so rich?"

"Thirty thousand a year. Just as if you did not know, and you engaged to him!"

"I never was engaged to him."

"What a story! Aunt Hilda says you were, and so does Gilbert."

"They are mistaken." But if they were, what made her so white when she spoke about it?

It was a sweet September evening when Gilbert came to us. There was a full moon in the sky—not a breath of air was stirring, and everything was silent save the distant barking of a farmer's dog, or the landrail's shrill note that reverberated through all the circle of the valley.

I had gone out to the gate to meet him half-an-hour before he could possibly come, for the world was so sweet that I wished to fancy myself alone in it waiting for him.

The privet hedge that enclosed the garden cast a shadow black as ebony on the gravelled walk, and the late roses looked chill and pale with the dew on their faces. I was so happy that I felt half afraid, and shivered a little as I heard the sound of approaching wheels.

He was driving, of course, but he alighted when he saw me, and we walked hand in hand up the short drive to the door.

Father came out into the hall to meet him, and as the two men shook hands, I was proud of them both. The poor little elderly Curate looked every inch as much

a gentleman as the handsome soldierly Baronet.

Mother was in the drawing-room in her black silk dress and lace cap, resting for once. Gilbert looked down on her with a face full of emotion when I introduced him, and only that it would have been un-English, I am sure that he would have kissed the hand she offered him. No doubt they were all stirred a good deal at this first meeting, but they fell to talking commonplaces, as people do, about his journey, and the weather; and then I slipped out of the room to look for Marion.

She was standing by the bed-room window looking out at the flood of moonlight that seemed to bathe the landscape in its serene tide. She wore a white dress, and in the faint light she looked very pale.

"Gilbert is here," I said.

"Yes, I saw you come up the drive with him."

"Then won't you come down to see him?"

"Certainly, I am quite ready."

"How grand you are!"

"In an old white muslin frock?"

"It isn't an old frock, it is your very newest."

"So it is, and one of the few dresses I never wore in London."

The light in the drawing-room was very faint when we entered it; but Gilbert saw us, and rose to greet us. Though I knew it was needless, I introduced them; and Marion bowed in silence, which made everyone feel constrained, and we were all uncomfortable till dinner was announced.

That put us more at our ease, and when once Marion had begun to talk, she was perfectly brilliant. I had never heard her so witty or so amusing.

I could not help wondering if Gilbert found her much changed, for I noticed him looking at her curiously many times.

Of course I saw nothing of Gilbert alone that night; but next morning I was in the garden betimes. Possibly the knowledge that he was there before me had hastened my movements a little.

"I hope you like my people," I said, slipping my hand through his arm, and trying to accommodate my pace to his.

"Very much indeed."

"Are they what you expected?"

"I expected less than the reality."

"Do you find Marion much changed?"

"Yes."

"But she is beautiful still."

"More beautiful than ever, I think."

"I wish I looked like her. I should do more credit to your taste then."

"Beauty is not everything."

"So people say; but no one ever said that it was not a very great deal."

We went into breakfast after a time, and that morning it was Marion's whim not to notice Gilbert; but he did not seem to mind much. He directed all his conversation to mother, and mother seemed to like him.

Father had several letters that morning, and mother had one from Aunt Hilda; but Gilbert had none, nor was there any recognisable reason why he should say, as soon as we were alone: "I think I shall go back to town to-day, Lucy."

"To-day?" I echoed blankly.

"Yes. I shall speak to your father as soon as I can make an opportunity, and then there will be nothing to detain me further."

"Then you wish to leave?"

"I don't wish it, Lucy; but I think I ought to leave."

"Well, just as you like."

He had been standing by the hearth; but now he came over beside me and put his arm round me.

"Instead of staying here with you, I want you to come and stay with me as soon as ever you can. Lucy, when will you be my wife?"

"Oh, I don't know; I have not thought of that!"

"Then think of it now—this is September. Shall we say the first week in October?"

"Three weeks off."

"Yes, why not? You don't want any paraphernalia or display."

"Oh no! I should like to be married quite quietly, though Aunt Hilda has determined on a great ceremony."

"Do you know what I have been wondering since I came here, Lucy?"

"No; what is it?"

"It was about your Aunt Hilda. But it is of no consequence."

"Oh yes, it is! You must tell me."

"Well, I was wondering whether she is a malignant witch or a good woman."

"Oh, you rude man! How can you say such a horrid thing?"

"I did not say it; I only thought it."

"Well, you may make up your mind that she is a very good woman, since she introduced me to you."

"Poor little Lucy! How grateful you are for small mercies! But you have not

answered my question. Will you marry me in a month?"

"I suppose it will be very undignified to consent, but, if it will make you happy—yes."

We talked of many things after this, in a practical and sensible way, as though we were already old married people; and when we heard father's voice in the hall, Gilbert went out to speak with him, and I ran upstairs to tell the latest turn of affairs to Marion.

She was in the room we called the work-room, and she was hard at work on an old sheet, turning the stout part to the centre.

I sat down opposite her idly, my face between my hands, and my elbows on the table.

I wanted her to say something that would encourage me to tell my tale; but she did not utter a single word nor lift her eyes from her sewing.

"Why don't you talk to me?" I asked pettishly; "you won't have me to talk to long. Gilbert and I are to be married in October."

"I hope you will be very happy."

"I think we are sure to be. Don't you like him?"

"He seems a very charming man."

There was nothing more to be got out of her, so I went downstairs, and she remained in the work-room all day. But whatever she was doing she was not sewing, for I found her needle sticking in the very same spot of iron-mould that I had noticed when I was talking to her.

Gilbert remained till the end of the week, as he had promised; but somehow the days were not so full of happiness as I had anticipated. Perhaps I saw less of him than I had hoped, for he had become very friendly with the boys, and took long walks with them daily. I don't know that I should have noticed this but for Chrissie, who was always saying that she hoped when she got a lover he would not show an obvious preference for any company rather than hers; but Chrissie always noticed what nobody else saw, and had a most unpleasant way of speaking her mind.

I think it was as much to show my contempt for Chrissie's insinuations as from any other motive, that I pretended a lot of private business about this time. Of course, there was always sewing to do, and Aunt Hilda insisted on a letter from me every week; and, therefore, I made these things into imperative claims, and would take my

needlework and writing materials down to the old summer-house, and sit there by myself, often half the afternoon. Perhaps I hoped that Gilbert would enquire after me and join me; and so he did sometimes, and then we talked together, though I don't think it was lovers' talk. Yet I don't know why I should say that, for what can lovers find more delightful to discuss than where they will go for their honeymoon, and how they will spend their time after they are married?

I don't know that I was discontented, and yet I don't think that I was perfectly happy, as I sat stitching away preoccupiedly beneath the shelter of the overgrown shrubs that half hid the entrance to the summer-house.

The little stream that purred past under cover of the long grass, was singing away most merrily, and a pair of chaffinches were musically discussing some ripe berries in the hedge. In the distance, Marion and Gilbert were sauntering in the sunlight, and, as my glance fell on them, I asked myself if there were many men and women in the world half as goodly to look on.

They seemed to have unbent towards each other in the last day or two, and I was glad of that, and gave them every opportunity of becoming friends.

They had been walking on the terrace beneath the windows, and some of these were open, and the soft breeze stirred the muslin curtains a little as they passed.

I thought they were coming to look for me; but no doubt they were only suspicious of eavesdroppers, and turned half-unconsciously and crossed the lawn, for they were walking slowly, and before they reached me they turned again and went in the opposite direction. But our garden was not very spacious, and, after a time, they came towards me, and snatches of their talk reached me.

"It will do no harm to make me understand now, and I should like to know what you meant," Gilbert was saying.

I could not hear her answer, and, when they turned and came back again, this time a little nearer, it was he who was speaking.

"How was it possible to imagine that you cared then, or would have remembered still? Oh Marion, Marion! what can I do or say?"

"You can neither do nor say anything, and I think it is rather insolent of you, Sir Gilbert, to assume that anything you could possibly say would be of the slightest consequence to me."

His answer was lost this time; but after a little I caught her words again.

"I do not think you have anyone to blame but yourself, if that affords you any consolation. As to blaming Aunt Hilda, I don't see the good of that. She wanted me to marry Lord Stelfox, and she did not want me to marry you, and, from her point of view, that was quite right."

"But she told me you were engaged to him; and I was not satisfied with that. I asked you if it was true, and you said yes."

"Which was a very poor joke to make with a person as literal as yourself. But you see I hardly took you seriously, seeing that it was but a few little hours since I had promised to be true to you for a lifetime if necessary."

"But the promise was such a desperately foolish one for you, that I was only too ready to doubt that you meant it," he said with a groan.

"But you see I did mean it. However, that is not of any consequence now. If you make Lucy happy I shall be quite satisfied that things are as they are."

Once again they passed out of hearing, and again came back, and Marion was speaking coldly and firmly:

"I forbid you ever to refer to this matter again. You are my sister's lover now, and, except in that capacity, not of the slightest interest to me."

"I shall remember," he answered gravely.

I don't know how long I sat there gazing straight before me blankly; perhaps an hour, perhaps only a few minutes.

Now that I realised the truth, that Marion and Gilbert had been lovers once, were lovers still in all but name, I seemed to have known it always, and, in a helpless way, to have been waiting for the blow which had just fallen. But that rendered it none the less cruel. Why should I be always the defeated one? Why should Marion's lovers always trample over my heart to reach her? Had I been more of a heroine I would not have remembered at that moment that this was not the first occasion on which Marion had wounded me cruelly; but I was not a heroine, and in a paroxysm of wrath, and rage, and misery, I thought both of Gilbert and Mr. Drew. What had I done to her? Why must she always embitter life for me?

And then to talk as she has done, so cruelly and boldly, within my hearing, not thinking of me and not caring! Oh, life was unjust, and men and women were

cruel! What had I done to deserve such pain and shame—I, of all people in the world?

I fell prostrate on the ground, and hid my face from the daylight, and found no words for my despair.

"Lucy, what in the world are you doing? We have been looking for you everywhere."

It was Marion who spoke, and I lifted my white face, and looked at her with my miserable swollen eyes.

"What is the matter?" she asked in an awed voice, though I knew in a moment that she understood.

I rose and pushed my hair back from my aching temples, and then I went towards the door where she was standing, and said huskily, "Come."

Without a word she turned and followed me across the turf.

Gilbert was standing by the hearth when we entered the drawing-room, and hearing us he turned.

"Take her," I said, pointing to my sister, and each word came broken by a sob, "she was yours before I was;" and then I turned my face away, and burst into heart-broken weeping.

It was very undignified, and the last thing in the world that I should have wished to do; but for all that I think I bore myself as bravely as they did.

Marion's eyes were downcast, and she could not utter a word, while, if ever a man looked overwhelmed, Gilbert did then.

"Can you forgive me?" he asked at last.

"Oh yes, of course I forgive you; but what was the good of making me your scapegoat? Could you not have loved Marion and left me alone? What had I ever done to you?"

"I meant to make you happy if I could; believe that at any rate," he said in an odd, hushed voice.

"Happy, with your heart in my sister's keeping, and you always acting a part! Well, I am very inferior, certainly; but yet I think I have a right to something more than that."

"He thought he loved you—indeed, he did love you," Marion said pleadingly.

But I turned on her furiously. "Don't dare to take his part—don't dare to speak to me," I cried, and then I fled from their sight.

Gilbert got away as soon as he could, and I don't think a single word

more passed between him and Marion. Three days later a letter came for father, in which Gilbert tried his best to explain matters. It was a letter that must have cost him tortures to write, and I was acutely sorry for him as I read it. Of course he professed unbounded veneration for me; but he made no secret of the fact that he loved Marion, and he contritely asked father's pardon for all the trouble he had caused in his family.

Father's hand shook a little as he read the letter. These last days had told on him like so many years.

"May I see what Sir Gilbert says?" I asked, extending my hand for the letter.

"He says nothing. What can he say?" but he gave me the letter, nevertheless. Then he rose and left the room; and Marion followed him. He went into the library and sat down dejectedly in his worn arm-chair, and Marion fell at his feet. "Don't be hard on me," she said through her sobs, "I feel like Cain already; don't make me feel like Cain and Abel too."

"This is a dreadful thing," father said tremulously.

"Yes, do you think I do not realise better than anyone how dreadful it is?"

"I suppose you will marry Sir Gilbert?" after a dreary pause.

"I suppose I shall—ultimately; but oh, father! all the joy is quite out of it now. If Lucy had only cared for him, it would have been bad enough; but to think that he actually asked her to marry him, that they have been engaged for weeks, and that—oh, how could I be so base as to take him from her?"

"Why did he ask her? I can't understand that," father said fretfully.

"It was all Aunt Hilda's doing. She was always angry with Gilbert and me. Angry with him because she fancied he stood between her and her pet plan of getting me well married; angry with me because I would not go back with her when she wanted me. She had cut Gilbert long ago; but when he came into his title she took him up again. I don't know what she meant by it—perhaps nothing at the first—but Lucy was there, and aunt is an inveterate matchmaker, and I suppose she saw her way to punish me for not being there also."

"But Sir Gilbert should not have been a mere tool in the hands of your Aunt Hilda," father answered severely.

"No, he should not; but if we never

made mistakes there would be less pain in the world. And you must not be too hard on him; he really was fond of Lucy and meant to make her happy, and only for the unfortunate mistake of his coming here all would have been well. But the chief fault is mine, I should have gone away when I knew he was coming—only that I had no place to go to."

I suppose things did not look quite so black when father and Marion had talked them over, nor every one so culpable, for father wrote to Gilbert that evening, and his letter was friendly, if a little stiff and cold. It was unfortunate that Sir Gilbert had mistaken his feelings for me, he said, but since I was willing to accept the fact of the mistake and forgive it, he thought we might all be very good friends in the future.

In another week a cautious letter came for Marion. Would she try and think kindly of the writer, and, when she thought he had been punished enough for all the mistakes he had made, would she write and say she forgave him? Till then he would manifest his sense of guilt by his patience.

Marion took several days to ponder her reply, but, when she did write, her letter was frank and kind. She was very sorry for him, very sorry for me, and a little sorry for herself; but she did not think anything that had gone wrong could be rectified by childishness and pretence. She loved him as much as she had ever done, and when time had taken the edge off every one's pain she would be his wife; but, till then, she thought it was better that he and she should seem to forget each other.

Gilbert accepted her opinion and went abroad, and it was not till a year after that he and she were married quietly in the parish church at Mudford, father officiating, and Chrissie acting as solitary bridesmaid. I was present, with mother, sitting in one of the pews near the altar, and I thought it a sad little ceremony, as sad as many a funeral.

Aunt Hilda came to see us after the wedding, and said many severe things of both bride and bridegroom, and sneered at me because I had been poor-spirited enough to let Gilbert go when I had won him; but when she asked me to go back with her again and see if there were not better men than Gilbert Leslie to be had for the seeking, I showed her that I was not so meek as she had thought.

"I never was happy in your house, and I never wish to see it again," I said. "And as to your kindness in taking up mother's children one after the other, to make them eat humble pie and obey you, I don't think it any kindness, but just a solace to your conscience."

"And why should my conscience suffer?" Aunt Hilda asked with her slight, cold smile.

"Oh, people like to feel themselves beneficent, and it is easier to patronise mother that way, than to halve your fortune with her, as you ought."

Aunt Hilda shrugged her shoulders, said it was wasted kindness to try to serve me, and ignored me during the remainder of her visit. And after she had left, mother scolded me for trying to alienate the only one of her family who had been kind to her.

Mother was dreadfully afraid that Aunt Hilda was offended past recall, so that when she wrote at the beginning of the following season, and offered to take Chrissie up to town and bring her out, mother was overwhelmed with gratitude. It is wonderful to me how these obstinate, independent people manage to coerce the judgement of others.

Chrissie went, of course; and now the society papers have it that "Lord Stelfox will shortly lead to the altar the beautiful granddaughter of the late Lord Hurst." We have not, however, had any private confirmation of this bit of gossip, and have not, therefore, accepted it yet.

Shortly after Marion's marriage, father was offered the beautiful living of Maplewood, which, of course, he accepted thankfully; and, after we had been installed there some time, Marion came to pay us a visit.

She is happy now, there is no doubt of that; and if she talked little of Gilbert and their life together, that was only to spare my feelings, I knew.

It was during her stay that Mr. Drew paid us his third visit, and he was so brotherly with her, that I think she suspected something, and after he had gone she took me aside and said: "I want you to tell me, Lucy, that you are going to make that good man happy."

And I said: "It is dreadfully commonplace of me, I know, and if I were a heroine such a thing would be impossible; but, not being a heroine, I suppose I may as well admit that, in the spring, I am going to marry Mr. Drew."

A DATELESS BARGAIN.

By C. L. PIRKIS,

Author of "*Lady Lovelace*," etc.

CHAPTER LVI.

TOWARDS morning the wind lulled, dying hard in a succession of long, low howlings. There was no glow of dawn in the sky, none of that glad flush of colour spread across the heavens, which seems like Creation's hymn of thankfulness to its Maker for night ended, day begun. Only the fog whitened a little, then thinned, and hung about the low ground in tattered folds.

Frank scanned the horizon with his old telescope. The hull of a wrecked vessel would have seemed all in keeping with that lashing brown sea, and dismal, iron-grey sky. But no vessel, wrecked or otherwise, broke the dreary monotony of the sea-scape.

They got their boat out, intending to pull round the coast and out into the open sea, in case there might be wreckage of some sort to tell the tale of the lost ship.

Young Christian's son, a boy of twelve or thirteen, made his way at daybreak to the lighthouse, bringing dismal accounts of the destruction the gale had wrought inland. The palings round the rye-fields had been carried away, the sheep-folds had been utterly destroyed, and some of the sheep blown into a gully. It would take a week to repair the damage.

Frank wondered what would repair the damage wrought outside on the wild Atlantic, and whether it might so happen that he held a personal interest in the answer to the question.

For reason with himself as he might, he could not divest himself of the notion that the winds of last night had held his fate in their hands; that somewhere beneath the murky, troubled waves, was perhaps hidden away a message for him which only the Day of Judgement would reveal.

They enlisted the boy's services to steer for them. The two men pulled across the Sound out into the open sea. It was rough work; they had to row their hardest, for the waves, although they lacked the terrific force and volume of overnight, were still turbulent. Nothing but a drear expanse of sea and sky met their gaze, turn it which way they would. They had left the remnants of the fog behind them in the Sound; the sky showed patches of bright blue here and there between the hillocks of fleeting

clouds. Not a boat was anywhere in sight, not a vestige of wreckage to be seen—not so much as the splinter of a mast or broken floating hen-coop.

They rowed backwards and forwards aimlessly for an hour or so, young Christian repeating meanwhile that brief chapter from his experience, of how that within a mile of where they rowed now a big Russian barque had gone down with all hands, and not so much as a floating spar had been left to tell the tale.

But Frank scarcely heard him for the tumult his own thoughts kept up within, a tumult which one simple question had started and kept going: "Now, supposing that Ned, on his way here, was drowned in the storm of last night, am I to wait on, trusting he has kept his promise to provide for that emergency? Or may I consider that I have fulfilled every claim that honour or gratitude can have upon me, and return to my friends?"

It was a complex question. He had at one time been quick in answering questions in a word, at cutting all sorts of knots with a single touch. But here was a knot that defied alike fingers or knife. Second thoughts suggested that, perhaps after all, it was a question he had no right to ask, and when he fell to considering upon what grounds he had started it, he found they were unsubstantial enough. His mind was restless and ill at ease; he had heard a signal-gun fired in the height of the storm; and on this slight foundation he had built a fabric sky-high. Ned was, of necessity, in that particular boat; Ned, of necessity, had been drowned, with every living soul on board. There was, evidently, nothing in reason to warrant such a conclusion.

With something of a groan he helped to run the boat in and pull it up on the beach. Then he offered to assist young Christian with his shattered palings and sheep-folds. Hard, incessant work, for that day at least, he felt he must have. To sit still with folded hands meant mental torture of the worst kind. Perhaps, while his hands were busy, his brain might clear.

With brief intervals for food, the two men worked hard till close upon sundown. Then another mood fell upon Frank; he grew restless, distracted again, threw his carpentering tools down in a heap, strapped his seal-cap under his chin, and went wading through the receding waters down to the beach once more.

Why he went he could not have said, he felt too perturbed in mind to reason on this or any matter. His brain felt all on fire, his nerves unstrung. The anxiety and suspense of the past nine months were beginning to tell upon him physically as well as mentally, the grip of the terrors of over-night was on him still.

The wind had ceased entirely now; the sea, with many a sullen roar, was settling down to its usual wash and ceaseless lapping at the base of the mighty headland on which the Light Tower was built. The fog was nothing more than a thin veil of silver mist, hanging here and there on the horizon in all sorts of fantastic clouds, which caught the wonderful Iris hues thrown upwards by the sinking sun. One cloud in shape was like a huge promontory, jutting out into a waveless sea of blue; another showed like a gigantic dolphin with fins of fire, and, like a dying dolphin, was flushing into marvellous, changeful tints, as minute by minute the sun sank lower. Sea-gulls flapped in front of it, catching momentary rainbow colours on their grey wings. The white-crested waves far out at sea caught here a golden tinge, there a dash of violet or crimson, at the will of the mist or of the dying sun.

Frank saw it all without seeing it. Great Nature will charm a man into speech, or awe him into silence, only in so far as the man's brain is calm enough to play the part of mirror to her brilliant lights or gloomy shades. Let that man's brain be turbulent with fear, remorse, passion, regret, and Nature will spread her glories before him in vain. She may pipe to him, he will not dance; mourn to him, and he will not lament.

Thus it was with Frank now. He was blind to the beauties around him; he saw nothing but the miserable tragedy of his own life being played out conjointly with that of another young life infinitely dearer to him than his own; saw himself here a prisoner chained to a rock, by chains none the less cruel that they were invisible; saw Joyce miles and miles away, stretching out empty arms towards him, with longing eyes and aching heart. He looked away from the brilliant sky picture overhead, and saw nought but the cruel, crawling merciless sea at his feet.

We talk about the grandeur of the sea, or its fury, or its cruelty, but you must put on one shore all that is most precious in life—love, happiness, home—and yourself, a lonely exile on another; then let the great

sea roll in between the two shores, to know what a jailor it can be.

And as Frank stood thus, a forlorn, despairing man, a sudden thought of Mab came to him. Whence it came, what brought it, he did not know. During all these months of exile his thoughts had rung the changes on but one keynote—Joyce. Hers was too engrossing a personality to leave much room for another's beside it; and, to say truth, though Mab might have flitted at times like a shadow through his dreams, she seldom or never filled his waking thoughts. Yet here, in the midst of this silence and solitude, came a thought as entirely distinct from its surroundings as would have been the sudden carol of a nightingale on that sea-shore, or the coo of a wood-pigeon.

One turns over the letters of a dear, dead friend, and tries to conjure out of the mists of bygone years the face we have known and loved; but we find that the sweet and once familiar features are not to be summoned at will. We tie up the packet of letters with their faded ribbon, put them by in the drawer amid sprigs of rosemary and dead roses, go out into the busy world, buy and sell in the market, or dance at our balls, when lo, of a sudden, the tender eyes look out at us among a hundred other faces, the sweet mouth smiles once more its greeting or adieu!

So it was with Frank now. Without effort of will, Mab's personality at that moment filled his thoughts; without strain to his memory he could see her face as he had known and loved it in the years gone by. Not as he had known it of late, with that brooding look of dreamy pre-occupation perpetually clouding eyes and brow, but as he could so well remember it in the old, happy days at Overbury, before death had entered the house—an anxious, thoughtful face, perhaps, as one could fancy the face of a guardian angel to be anxious and thoughtful, with its vicarious sorrows, but a face that could withal shine out into an intensity of joy, as he could remember it did once in the grey dawn of a memorable day, when she had laid her hand upon his shoulder, and had told him the glad news that Joyce had passed the crisis of her illness.

This vision of Mab was so real to him that it would have scarcely startled his senses if, at that very moment, she had turned the corner of the big, jutting headland, under whose shadow he stood, and had come towards him holding out both

her hands—as she had so often met him in the old days—saying: “Oh! I am so glad to see you; Joyce and I were just at that moment talking about you.”

A gull wheeled low over his head, flapping its grey wings, and uttering its long wailing cry. Was it a presage of bad weather again for the night? Frank wondered, lifting his eyes anxiously to the quarter where the sun had sunk, and whence the wind now blew.

All the colour had faded out of the sky; inky masses of clouds hung low upon the horizon; the sea showed beneath a cold stretch of iron-grey, over which the night mists were slowly spreading themselves. From out the mists, far out at sea, the “white horses” ominously lifted and tossed their curling crests.

But presently, something else besides the “white horses” seemed moving in the distant dimness. Frank strained his eyes their hardest, shading them with his hand from the dashing spray. Yes, it was a boat, and a heavily-laden boat, too; for it sat low in the water, as though its burthen were as much as it could manage. And it was also, so it seemed, making straight for Light Island. But what of that? Frank asked himself. What was there in the fact of a heavily-laden boat making straight for the shore to set his pulses throbbing at fever heat? Had he not seen scores of such boats go out and come in, all through the fishing season? What more likely than that it was a boat from one of the smacks off Faroe fishing banks charged, perhaps, with letters or light cargo for the Faroes, and anxious to run for land before a wild night set in?

As the boat came nearer, another thought succeeded. What if this boat's load were a remnant saved from the wreck of the vessel in distress last night? What if Ned?—but here, with a strong hand, he put an end to a thought that, bordering on hope, fell little short of agony. He would just stand still and wait patiently. He had strong, far sight. Five minutes would show him who were the occupants of the boat. He would know Ned's head and shoulders among a hundred. And what was a five minutes' waiting compared with the months of miserable suspense he had lived through?

But, as he stood and waited, he was compelled to own that never before had five minutes spun themselves out to such an unconscionable length. On and on came the boat, slowly but steadily, its occupants

showing black against the grey of the sky, and sea above, below. Yes; it was the remnants of a wrecked crew, Frank decided; there were certain signs of distress about them there was no mistaking; some of them were hatless: one or two seemed leaning forward, elbows on knees, as though they had had a rough time of it and were well-nigh worn out. Frank's eye strained painfully for the broad shoulders and head which were to bring deliverance to him. “I shall see better in another minute,” he muttered, trying to keep up the illusion of hope a little longer.

And in another minute he did see better, and the illusion of hope died utterly in its realisation. For in that drooping figure with head bowed and hands clasped, seated there in the stern of the boat he recognised, with a thrill of joy so intense it was near akin to a pain, the face and figure of Joyce Shenstone.

He scarcely dared trust his eyesight. “It's the spray that's blinding me,” he said aloud, in a voice which none would have recognised as his, it quavered so. But, nevertheless, he was in the sea in no time, and as nearly out of his depth as he could trust himself to go.

Uncle Archie looked up at the great, beetling crag. “Lift your head, child,” he said, turning to Joyce, “and thank Heaven we're safe now. Here's Light Island.”

The Captain dropped his glass from his eye. “Bravely pulled, well done, men,” he said. The men drew their oars into the boat, wondering much over the gaunt-looking figure with seal-cap and unkempt beard that had hailed them, and was helping to pull their boat high and dry on the beach.

But they wondered still more when, as they held out their hand to help Joyce land, the same gaunt-looking figure pushed past them, took her bodily into his arms and carried her to shore.

Thus these two sorely-tried lovers joined hands once more. There came for them one moment of rapture, of intense unutterable joy, such as no human soul can live through more than once in a lifetime, a moment not to be counted by the hands of a clock, for in its brief yet immeasurable “now” a whole miserable past was gulfed and gone.

And when tongue can find words to speak the joy of such a moment as this, Language will have reached its goal, and may fitly claim the right to halve the throne of Thought.

Frank clasped Joyce to his heart as he had never in his life clasped her before; and, as for Joyce, her breath came and went in gasps, she trembled in every fibre of her body, but words she had none.

"Is that the way they do things on the Faroes?" asked Morton solemnly, for the moment not recognising Frank, and giving the Captain a nudge as he spoke.

But Uncle Archie, like Joyce, said never a word. He only stood still on the beach, quaking and shaking from head to foot as he watched Frank and Joyce a yard from him standing silent also, holding each other's hands, looking into each other's eyes.

"Perhaps," thought the old gentleman, "by-and-by, when we reach that far-off shore towards which we are all travelling so fast, just in that way we shall greet our friends of lang syne--hold their hands, look into their eyes, say nothing."

Then another thought struck him, to which he gave utterance at once. "Men," he said in a thin, trembling voice, looking round at his shipwrecked companions, "we have been through great perils the past few hours. Before we go a step farther I should like to kneel down here on the beach, and thank the good Lord who has brought us safe to land."

"Aye, aye, sir," answered the Captain, "if you'll be parson, we'll all follow lead."

So Uncle Archie knelt down on the rough pebbles, and one and all knelt down beside him, those who had hats taking them off, and Frank and Joyce clasping hands still.

"We thank thee," began Uncle Archie in a choking voice.

"We thank thee," faltered Frank in muffled tones.

Then there came a pause.

"We thank thee," began Uncle Archie again, turning upwards his old face in the twilight with tears streaming down both cheeks.

But he could get no farther, and no one else had a voice wherewith to follow him even so far.

And as for the Amen, the great sea must have said it for them, for only its voice was heard as they rose from their knees.

CHAPTER LVII.

WHEN they found their voices, however, they had enough to do with them. Never before, surely, had the old brown rocks of Light Island to echo such a buzz and hum of talk.

The sailors, both Danish and British, began telling of the rough time they had had out there in the Atlantic: how that when day broke and the wind had lulled they had found themselves miles out of their course, well on their way to Iceland; how that the tiller of their boat had broken and the Captain had been forced to steer with his hand in the water till his arm was half-frozen; how that their lips were parched and dry, for, save a half-filled brandy flask which one of them had in his pocket, drink there was none. Nor was food to be had either, even so much as a crumb of dry biscuit. And how that in this plight all through that raging storm their hard work of baling, of rowing, and of occasional desperate backing of the boat, to escape the breaking of the big waves upon her, had had to go on continuously.

All this was talked over and recapitulated again and again, as they threaded the mountain thoroughfare towards the row of inland huts, where Frank knew a hearty welcome, together with food and shelter, would be offered to the shipwrecked party.

But Frank's and Joyce's stories were yet to be told. Uncle Archie ought, perhaps, to have been the one to demand an explanation of Frank, to rush at him with a whole catechism of "whys" and "wherefores." He did not, however. He contented himself with walking side by side with the young people, his arms folded behind him, his eyes cast down. He probably felt that the strain of emotion he had already to bear was enough for the present; the "whys" and "wherefores" had better be deferred for a time. He shook his head now and again, as though at his own thoughts, as he went along; and once or twice Frank noticed that he stumbled, as though his feet could hardly carry him. Physical hardship tells heavily on the down-side of sixty.

As for Morton, he threw himself heartily on the Danish Captain for companionship; and, had anyone followed close on his heels listening to his talk, such expressions as the following might have been heard of frequent recurrence:

"I knew how it would be from the very first. I always said he was alive and hearty somewhere." This said with a nod and side glance towards Frank. "A man doesn't serve twenty-five years in a profession like mine without knowing what's what."

Frank, like Uncle Archie, felt that it was better that his story and Joyce's should be

kept waiting for awhile. The suddenness of the whole thing was overwhelming. The simple fact of walking beside Joyce in quiet, silent happiness, was utterly bewildering. It was like giving a man too much food after months of famine. The mere thought of the agony that would have been his, had he known who were outside in the darkness struggling with wind and wave for dear life, was in itself a cruel torture. He tried to shut it out of his mind; it hurt him as the recollection of some awful calamity escaped by a hair's breadth will hurt a man for hours after the danger is past.

Something else hurt him even more grievously — the still, white tragedy of Joyce's face. The anguish and long patience written upon it were easy enough to read. No joy of meeting, however intense, could efface it.

Yet though Frank said to himself it was better for them both that his story and hers should remain untold for a time, there was one question which rushed naturally to his lips. It was:

"Where is Ned? Of course it was he who told you where to find me, Joyce?"

Joyce started.

"Poor Ned!" she answered as calmly as she could. "You do not know—how could you? He was killed—shot at Greenock, no doubt by some member of his society anxious to avenge Captain Buckingham's death."

Frank almost staggered.

"Dead! Buckingham! Ned!" he said in a bewildered tone, putting his hand to his head.

Then a sudden great fear took possession of him. Those past nine months held many a dismal secret, not a doubt; and one by one, in some quiet corner they would be told to him. But there was one dread that must be set at rest at once, so he asked a question in a nervous, round-about fashion, lacking courage to put it direct.

"Joyce," he said, "I feel as the old prisoners released from the Bastille must have felt, when they began to ask after the friends they had left behind in the outer world. You and Uncle Archie I see before me alive and well, thank Heaven! but tell me who else of those I cared for are alive and well also?"

Joyce's hand held fast in his began to tremble violently.

"All your people in Gloucestershire were

well when I heard last," she answered very quietly.

Frank made an impatient movement. "I mean in your own home circle," he said.

"My mother and Aunt Bell are well also," she said, her voice now sinking very low.

"Go on."

But Joyce was silent. Then Frank knew that his great dread was realised, and that however many kindly voices might welcome him home, Mab's would not be numbered among them.

He said nothing; but he felt now that Joyce's story, when it came to be told, would hold its own against his for tragic gloom.

The sheep-dogs on watch outside the huts raised a hubbub as the party approached. Young Christian, and one or two others came out to meet them.

"You did not tell me," he said in his mixed Danish, wagging his yellow beard at Frank, "that the friend you were waiting for was a woman."

Then he welcomed the strangers heartily, entered into friendly talk with his compatriots, and with the help of the women a plentiful though simple meal was soon set before the weary travellers.

At meal time they discussed the question of sleeping arrangements. How could they make room for so many within the small compass of their huts?

Naturally the light tower suggested itself.

"It will be my last night on duty," said Frank; "some one, no doubt, will keep me company through the watch." And Uncle Archie and Joyce, feeling, in spite of their fatigue, what an impossibility sleep would be until confidences had been exchanged, hailed with delight the prospect of an eight or ten hours' quietude.

So in the little room which had been prison-house or catacomb to Frank through so many dreary months, those three sat up through the night talking and listening by turns, making each other's hearts ache over again, bringing tears to each other's eyes, words of pity to each other's lips.

Once Joyce bowed her head on the arm of the old wife's wicker chair, and her tears fell in a shower on the rusty knitting pins which lay beside it, as Frank told the story of the miserable night when he lay tied hand and foot at Ned's mercy. He would fain have glossed over this part of his narrative, but Uncle Archie would not have it. "Go on," he had said, "tell us

everything. Let her cry. It will do her good. She has been dry-eyed for many a day past."

On parts of her story Joyce touched but lightly. She dared not test her powers of self-control by going through the last day of Mab's illness, nor Frank's by giving in detail the history of Captain Buckingham's persecution. By-and-by Frank would have much to hear, not a doubt.

But once, in spite of her reticence, Frank sprang to his feet in overwhelming indignation and anger, as she told simply, without comment, her own and Uncle Archie's interview with Ned, and how that, through all those long months of suspense, the Irishman had not given them so much as a word of hope.

Frank's indignation refused restraint. Hot, angry words came in a rush to his lips.

"I can't forgive him—dead and gone though he is. He expected me to keep my faith, and he broke his! If I had but known! He had better by far have been the murderer he might have been than the coward he was."

Joyce pleaded for him, telling the story of her anonymous letter and her long hour of waiting on Chelsea Bridge.

"He made the attempt, not a doubt, to let me know a part of the truth as soon as he could. I dare say he thought that, if he had told me at first, I should have relaxed effort to find you, and so have betrayed him. Also, no doubt he saw always before him this happy end to all our misery. He was young; he loved his life——"

"Yes; and he lost it—as those deserve to who love life better than honour," interrupted Frank hotly. "Don't ask me to forgive him, Joyce. I could forgive Buckingham almost sooner than him—though Heaven knows that would be hard work enough."

But later on he made a concession; at least Joyce understood it to be such.

The day after this night-watch saw the whole party ensconced in an hotel at Thorshavn, the little capital of the Faroes, and two days after that saw them on board a homeward-bound steamer.

Frank and Joyce stood on deck looking their last at the little islands; at the staring white tower of Light Island; the steep, awful rocks, grand, and terrible in outline, soft and tender in their green and brown colouring under the subdued Arctic light.

They had stood in silence thus for a long time, while Uncle Archie seated close at hand turned over a packet of American newspapers which, just as the boat was on the point of starting, had been thrown on board by some good people for the old gentleman's especial delectation.

At last Frank spoke, words that could be applicable to nothing unless it were to the denunciatory judgements he had passed upon Ned, Buckingham, and one or two others, and to the easy fashion in which he had at one time been wont to solve the problems of life in a single word.

"The truth of it is, Joyce," he said, "we are all of us too ready to lay down the law and pass sentence on every matter under Heaven. We think it a proof of our wisdom, instead of our folly, to have an answer ready to every question that presents itself. We rush in and talk, talk, talk, where angels would veil their faces and weep in silence."

Possibly Frank, like Joyce, had not watched out long hours in solitude for nothing.

"Aye," said Uncle Archie solemnly, looking up from a paragraph he was reading, with misty eyes, "a prayer for mercy for ourselves, a cry of pity for the whole human race, these are the only words that come fitly from our lips."

The paragraph he had been reading appeared under the heading of "News from New York," and related how a young woman, in the act of landing at midnight from a Greenock steamer, had taken a false step, been precipitated into the harbour, and had been drowned, in spite of efforts made to rescue her.

The name of the woman was Kathleen O'Shea.

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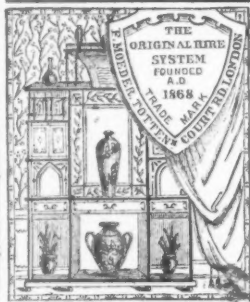
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